"M" IS FOR THE MANY THINGS
Ephesians 5:25-33
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One of America's greatest scouting leaders, Walter MacPeek, liked to tell this story from a by-gone era: Willie's mother found a note signed by her twelve-year-old son under her breakfast plate one morning. It read like this: "Dear Mother: For carrying in six buckets of coal, twenty-five cents; for making the fire four times, fifteen cents; for going on two errands, ten cents. Total amount owed, fifty cents."

Willie's mother got up from the table, took a half dollar from her purse and put it on the table near her son's plate. Willie was very pleased.

The next morning, however, he discovered a note under his plate. It read: "Dear Willie: For providing food and clothing and a bed for twelve years, nothing. For dressing a baby boy for three years, nothing. For taking care of a boy with typhoid fever for eight weeks, nothing. For nursing an eight-year old boy with scarlet fever for twelve weeks, nothing. Total, nothing."

Willie didn't look up for a long time. He was too busy thinking.

It seems to me that that story applies to children and to husbands and to women themselves in many, many ways. That is the topic of this sermon.

In spite of Phyllis Schlafly and the neanderthal mentality of her cohorts, our society has moved beyond the position of insisting that a woman's only proper place is in the home. Women have increasingly greater opportunities for vocations and careers, increasingly greater chance to be valued as persons rather than functionaries. That is happening due to the struggle of many women and men for a cause that I believe is just and Christian. There is much left to be done in the sexism struggle. Some fields are still closed to women because of custom and not because of any inability. Pay for women averages two-thirds of what men receive for the same work. All sorts of property rights are denied married women. The list of inequities goes on and on.

The fate of the proposed constitutional amendment is a very sad commentary on our political system. For years now state legislatures have been skirmishing over this simply-worded Equal Rights Amendment: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." I have read every conceivable argument against the E.R.A. and for the life of me, I cannot see how any person concerned with justice and fairness can vote against it. It is simply the basic American democracy I was taught in high-school civics. And yet it looks like the good ol' boy political networks in some states have doomed E.R.A. If they can do that violence to a basic American ideal, I shudder to think how the New Federalism will fare in the same repressive hands.

Even though we haven't come far enough yet in the matter of women's rights, still there has already been one major side effect in getting as far as we have. In struggling for equal employment rights for women, our society has unwittingly devalued the worth of a woman's vocation in the home. Clearly, not all women should be wives and homemakers and mothers. No more so than that all men should be farmers and hunters. The modern concept that women have a choice of roles and callings is quite right. But we have tended to forget that the vocational choice of home and family is at least as valuable and important as any other. It is a demanding fulltime vocation worthy of the most talented and intelligent of women.

For years we have stressed how important it is for fathers to give priority to wife and children no matter what their profession. There is progress on that front. More is needed, it goes without saying, but many fathers are shifting their personal values toward family. I hope working mothers won't let that priority slip in their quest for fulfillment and finances.

On Mothers' Day, of course, we focus especially the role of women in families. The Old Testament does precisely that, though sometimes very subtly. I can remember my Sunday School days when I would join in poking fun at the long, boring, repetitive genealogy lists in the Bible. You remember the "begats," the family lines of who begat whom, who then proceeded to beget the next generations of whoms. I didn't know then that there was a sermonic point to be developed from the begats (and I wouldn't have cared, then). For instance, we are told that King Ahaz begat Hezekiah, the next king. And the writer goes on to inform us that Abi was the mother, and that she was the daughter of Zechariah. Usually the writer doesn't bother to give the mother's name; lineage was traced through the males. So, what's the point? Well, King Ahaz was a notoriously evil king and his son Hezekiah turned out to be one of the best kings of Israel. But how did an evil father produce an outstandingly good son? The mother made the difference. Abi was known to be an excellent woman.

The next in the list of the "begats," though, reverses the story. Good King Hezekiah himself begat son Manasseh, a miserable excuse as a king, so it turns out. Why? The Old Testament writer points out that Manasseh's mother was Hephzibah, a woman no one respected. Hence, an evil son. There are numerous similar cases.

So even in the patriarchial society of ancient Israel, where blood lines were traced only on the male side, still it was recognized that mothers had the primary influence in developing character. To have good leadership for the next generation, the nation depended on the mothers in the royal line.

The Old Testament book of Proverbs is very forthright in this matter: "Teach a child how he should live, and he will remenber it all his life." The style of teaching a child is often as important as the content. Rufus Jones was one of the greatest leaders of the Quakers, one of the outstanding Christians in the first half of this century. His whole career emphasized God's lovingkindness and mercy. Jones told how he learned about that.

It seems his parents went away one summer day and left him with strict orders to weed the farm's turnip patch. Jones said he had never understood the biblical phrase, "from everlasting until everlasting," until that hot afternoon as he looked down those long rows of weedy turnips. Just then two friends came by with bait and fishing tackle. When he came home late that afternoon, Rufus found his mother waiting for him. He knew what was in store for him and he knew he deserved it. She led him to his room silently; that was how he always got it. Now, let Rufus Jones tell the rest in his own words: "A miracle happened instead. Mother put me in a chair, kneeled down, put her hands on me and told God all about me....She told God what she had always expected me to be. And then how I disappointed her hope. 'O God,' she said, 'take this boy of mine and make him the boy and man he is divinely designed to be.' Then she bent over and kissed me and went out and left me alone in the silence with God." We know now that a great man of God developed from the boy raised by that mother.

Of course, child-rearing doesn't have to be the mother's province alone. It certainly shouldn't be. Couples who find ways to share child-rearing duties in some fashion are very wise. Their children wind up strongly influenced by both mother and father. And, while parents without partners can be excellent parents, I am sure the

best influence on children comes from parents who are happy in their marriage.

The book of Proverbs also has something to say about that to husbands: "Find a wife and you find a good thing; it shows that the Lord is good to you." Modern sociologists reinforce that judgment. Study after study indicates that the life of married men is longer and happier than that of unmarried men. One statistic that caught my eye concerns the mental health of men. Compared to married men, never-married men go into mental hospitals five times more often; divorced men are admitted fourteen times more often. As Proverbs says, men, a good wife "shows that the Lord is good to you."

Willie's bill under his mother's breakfast plate indicated he really didn't appreciate her as he should have. Many husbands seem equally unappreciative of their wives. Not by leaving demanding notes under breakfast plates, perhaps. Adult male inconsideration shows up more often in doing some things and not doing others.

The unappreciative "doing" includes hiding behind the newspaper or relaxing in front of the TV even if her duties mean she can't sit down before bedtime. Other "doing" might be the husband pursuing hobbies and activities outside the home without making sure his wife also has the time and opportunity. The "doing" may also include his making important decisions solo even though they affect her.

The "not doing" of domestic inconsideration includes praise not given, attention not paid to the homemaker's concerns. One study listed some direct quotes: "When the house is immaculate, no one ever says, 'You've done a fantastic job.'" Another homemaker complains, "When there's no paycheck, it's hard to believe your work is worthwhile." Obviously, one needed paycheck is praise from the husband. His sharing in the work is another form of paycheck. In fact, especially when both spouses are employed, some agreed-upon equity in performing household duties is absolutely required.

The scripture lesson behind this sermon is from the New Testament epistle to the Ephesians. Today's passage follows that widely quoted verse: "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands." We've all heard that repeatedly. Few speakers quote the verse just before that: Wives and husbands, "submit yourselves to one another because of your reverence for Christ." Even less often do speakers quote the verses which follow. They go like this:

> "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He did this to dedicate the church to God by his word, after making it clean by washing it in water, in order to present the church to himself in all its beauty -- pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any other imperfection. Men ought to love their wives just as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself. (No one ever hates his own body. Instead, he feeds it and takes care of it, just as Christ does the church; for we are members of his body.) As the scripture says, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one.' There is a deep secret truth revealed in this scripture, which I understand as applying to Christ and the church. But it also applies to you: every husband must love his wife as himself, and every wife must respect her husband." (5:25-33)

In the harshly male-dominated society of that day, even such an anti-feminist as the writer of Ephesians could say "Every husband must love his wife as himself." Writing just a little earlier, Paul said: "There is no difference between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus."

Such passages show that the Christian Church, from the very beginning, worked to give women a full measure of self-worth. Society denied a woman's value, put her in a class far lower than men. But Christians followed the example of Jesus and declared men and women of equal value. Unfortunately, the church departed from that beginning and reverted to the prevailing dehumanizing social standards. But now, in the twentieth century, Christianity is again awakening to the real Bible teachings about the worth of a woman. We need a lot of men who will awaken to the same truth.

The vocation I have been describing is really three vocations: wife, mother, homemaker. Not "housewife," please. That is a pet peeve of mine. A woman is not married to a house, at least she shouldn't be, and husband and family should not make her feel like she is. Wife, mother, homemaker: three vocations which when put all together describe one of the hardest jobs in the world, perhaps the very hardest. I mean that completely. There is no more demanding and no more valuable profession. I do not mean to deny the worth of other fields women are in. I'm glad they are finding a wider and wider range of opportunity. I do not mean to deny the value of all the vocations men engage in either, including my own. But none of them is more demanding or more valuable than being a good wife, mother, and homemaker. That must not be forgotten as we very properly extol all the other contributions women make. Let us also extol men who share increasingly in the duties of parenting and homemaking.

Little Timmy slept all alone in his upstaire bedroom. Then one night he was badly frightened by a thunderstorm which seemed to explode just outside his window. In the midst of the lightning and thunder, his mother heard him cry and went up to comfort him. She reassured him; told him he shouldn't be afraid because God would take care of him. And Timmy replied: "Then you come up here and stay with God. I"ll go down and sleep with Daddy."

I'm sure Timmy knew God loves him. But every day of his life showed him that Mommy and Daddy shared a very special comfort and love and mutual support. And that was the security he knew best.

AMEN.

Thank you, God, for creating us to live in families. We praise you for devoted mothers and fathers who daily make your love real and vital and concrete, enabling children to become what you design them to be, through Jesus Christ.

AMEN.